

**Opening Statement of Chairman Tom Davis
Government Reform Committee Hearing,
“Getting Ready for the ‘06 Hurricane Season”
May 24, 2006**

A wise man observed, “The time to repair the roof is when the sun is shining.” Today we ask what has been done to repair and strengthen our leaky national “roof” in the nine months since the sun broke through the dark clouds of Hurricane Katrina.

The 2006 hurricane season begins one week from tomorrow and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) predicts another very active period in the Atlantic basin. NOAA forecasts up to sixteen tropical storms, ten of which could become hurricanes. Six of those could become “major” storms – Category 3 or higher. But even today’s best science can’t tell us when, where, how many, or how hard hurricanes might hit. Once again, we’re playing Russian roulette against Mother Nature and it doesn’t really matter how many bullets are in the cylinder. Any one could be lethal. Coastal states from Texas to Maine are vulnerable. We’ve been warned, and we should get ready.

The Select Committee on Katrina found preparedness gaps and deficiencies at the federal, state and local levels of government and cited inadequate preparedness as the cause of inexcusable weaknesses and failures in the disaster response. Emergency personnel often lacked requisite experience, skills and training. Evacuations were not coordinated. Critical commodities disappeared into clogged logistics channels. Medical services were fragmented. Military assistance did not always mesh with civilian response plans. Communications broke down and the resulting information vacuum suffocated decision making everywhere from the White House to the fire house.

So we asked today’s witnesses to describe what has been done in response to findings and recommendations by the Select Committee, the Senate Homeland Security Committee, the White House, GAO, Inspectors General, and others to make sure we will be as prepared as possible when disaster strikes. To be sure, in the face of catastrophic damage on a regional scale, the challenges are enormous. But the size and complexity of the task cannot excuse any failure to meet simple human needs – food, water, shelter, medical care. This isn’t rocket science; it’s the art of caring for our fellow citizens in need.

Since last year, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and its subordinate organizations, including the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), have worked to retool federal capabilities to support the state and local response. More commodities have been bought and pre-positioned, logistics and tracking systems have been upgraded, and more radios and satellite phones have been deployed. The Departments of Defense and Health and Human Services have streamlined decision making chains and better integrated their programs into the National Response Plan. States and localities have similarly bulked up their response capabilities.

But quantitative improvements alone do not necessarily insure we are ready with the agile, proactive, scalable response needed to meet Katrina's 2006 counterparts. FEMA is still not fully staffed and many key positions are being filled on an acting basis. Federal and state medical responses do not appear tightly coordinated yet. And recent hurricane preparedness exercises, however useful, have also confirmed some worst fears about a detached, top-down federal approach to emergency management.

Preparedness is not just a governmental obligation. It is a societal responsibility. The federal government should be ready to push help toward the impact zone before landfall. States, counties, cities and towns should be well drilled in public communications, evacuation and shelter operation. Churches, non-profits, businesses and neighborhoods should have plans to mitigate damage and spur recovery efforts. Families and individuals should be prepared to protect themselves by assembling emergency kits and having a plan.

Yet very recent surveys show too many people, organizations and businesses are not prepared to do their part.

Our witnesses this afternoon represent every element of the national response. Representatives from DHS and FEMA will discuss steps to correct the many problems exposed by Katrina. Testimony from the Department of Health and Human Services will describe a better coordinated public health response to life-threatening events. As the first military element in every disaster response, the National Guard paves the way for all subsequent DOD assistance and their witness will discuss the effective integration of defense resources into the civilian response. Testimony from state and local emergency managers will provide invaluable perspective on the extent to which federal efforts have helped them make tangible improvements to local capabilities. And our second panel, consisting of preparedness experts from the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, the American Red Cross and the Council on Excellence in Government, will confirm the critical importance of corporate and individual readiness to an effective national response.